

**Q+A With**  
**Steven Howard, Author**  
***Leadership Lessons from the Volkswagen Saga***

1. How did you come to write *Leadership Lessons from the Volkswagen Saga*?

When I first read about the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announcement on Volkswagen's wrongdoing, I instinctively knew that this was not likely to be just another corporate scandal that gets swept away in a few months. I knew that the story would touch all of my professional hot buttons — leadership, corporate responsibility, corporate image management and branding, and leadership accountability.

2. What interested you the most about the Volkswagen scandal as it unfolded?

Two things. First, I am not a technical person, so learning about the defeat device software used by the Volkswagen engineers was fascinating. When combined with all of the tricks and gimmicks that all automotive manufacturers seem to use to pass emissions testing and improve certified miles-per-gallon figures, it was a remarkably innovative solution. Unfortunately, it was also blatant cheating.

Secondly, I was amazed at the way the Volkswagen executives and corporate communications team continued to mismanage the crisis from a communications perspective. Even today they continue to refer to the cheating scandal as “the diesel issue,” as if the crisis had something to do with the fuel being used to run their engines.

3. Now that Volkswagen has agreed to settlements with the U.S. Department of Justice and the EPA, is the story over?

No. In fact it is far from over. There are dozens of investor lawsuits in various jurisdictions around the world waiting for court dates. Plus, six Volkswagen executives and employees in Germany have been indicted by a U.S. federal grand jury on a variety of felony charges. One of them has been arrested by the FBI and is currently in jail,

having been denied bail. He will either cut a plea bargain or face trial, perhaps as soon as April.

Plus, millions of Volkswagen vehicles with emissions testing cheat device software continue to spew dangerous nitrogen oxide (NOx) pollutants into the air a full 18 months after this cheating scandal was publicly raised by the EPA and nearly three years after West Virginia University first published its test results.

And, perhaps most important, there is an issue regarding CO<sub>2</sub> emissions problems on Audi vehicles with standard transmissions that remains outstanding.

4. What do you think happens next?

The European Parliament is considering new legislation that will change the way vehicles are tested and certified as road worthy in the European Union. This could happen as early as mid 2017. The Volkswagen executive sitting in a federal jail in Detroit will likely cut a plea bargain deal also by mid year, since he is facing up to 160 years in jail if convicted on the felony charges he faces. But he will likely have to implicate and provide proof of the involvement of higher ups in the Volkswagen organization before the DOJ agrees to a plea arrangement.

Additionally, there are on-going investigations in Britain, Canada, China, Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and other nations that remain outstanding. Plus, there are dozens of investor lawsuits around the world, as well as almost two dozen lawsuits from U.S. states alleging violations of their respective environmental, clean air, and consumer protection laws.

5. What is the key message in your book for leaders?

One significant lesson for all leaders, particularly those in the U.S., is that individual criminal activity is now more likely to result in individual charges and penalties than ever before. The U.S. Department of Justice has thus far taken baby steps in implementing its relatively new policy of enforcing individual accountability for

corporate wrongdoing. Indications are that the new Trump administration will maintain the policies outlined in the Yates Memo of September 2015 that set guidelines for this policy. Plus, new Attorney General Jeff Sessions indicated his personal support for going after corporate wrongdoers both when he was Attorney General of Alabama and when he served as a U.S. Senator.

6. What are your other books?

Prior to writing *Leadership Lessons from the Volkswagen Saga* I published a quite popular, easy-to-read book on leadership titled *8 Keys To Becoming A Great Leader (With leadership lessons from Gibbs, Yoda and Capt'n Jack Sparrow)*.

My first book was *Corporate Image Management: A Marketing Discipline*. It was published in 1998 and still has important lessons on corporate branding and image management for any leaders. In fact, the leaders at Volkswagen should have read this book!

My other marketing books include *Marketing Words of Wisdom*, *The Best of the Monday Morning Marketing Memo*, and *Powerful Marketing Memos*. All are available through Amazon in paperback and Kindle formats.

I have also published a five-book series of Asian quotations, called the Asian Words of Wisdom Series. Titles include *Asian Words of Success*, *Asian Words of Meaning*, *Asian Words of Inspiration*, *Indispensable Asian Words of Knowledge*, and *The Book of Asian Proverbs*. Again, all are available through Amazon.

7. Have you ever driven a Volkswagen car?

Actually, not until *Leadership Lessons from the Volkswagen Saga* was published. Then, within weeks of the book coming out I made two business trips, and on each trip Avis gave me a Volkswagen rental vehicle! I couldn't help but smile at the irony of that.

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